Fairbury's Interesting 100 Year History Revealed

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Baptists Hold First Meeting In 1858

By Rev. J. Coker, October 11th issue, 1908.

The first distinctively Baptist meeting ever held here, of which we have any record, was held September 5, 1858, in the school house, situated where Mr. Patton John's residence now stands, by the few Baptists who had come to make for themselves a home upon these prairies. After a sermon by Elder Branch, the question of forming a Baptist church was discussed and it was unanimously decided to meet on the first Saturday in October to organize such members as may desire into a regular Baptist church. Elder Branch was instructed to convene a council of neighboring Baptist churches at said date. The council met but few were present, and a part of those who were invited to sit in council had not arrived, so they adjourned until the following morning, October 3, 1858. On Sabbath morning there were only three members of the council present, these from Smith's Grove church. Voted to proceed to organization. The following persons presented their letters and were formed into "The First Baptist Church of Fairbury, Illinois": Caleb L. Patton, Orphia Patton, Jesse Hanna, Richard Hanna and Joanna Hanna. Sermon by Elder Branch, after which the New Hampshire confession of faith was adopted, covenant read and assented to. Elder Branch continued to preach for the young church once in two weeks.

The first item recorded after the organization was at a meeting held March 5, 1859, when Brother A. W. and Sister M. A. Higbee are received by letter, Brother C. L. Patton was chosen deacon and Richard Hanna, Clerk. The Divine blessing was granted and the little company were encouraged by additions of useful members. Saturday, March 12, 1859, Jacob and Pleasant Compston were received as candidates for baptism and buried with Christ in baptism the following day. These were the first thus received into the church, and still remain earnest followers of Jesus and devoted members of the church. Sister Orpha Patton, mother of Mrs. Compston, was the only remaining constituent member; the others had all entered into the rest that remaineth for the people of God. The meetings were held there at that time for about a year in the same school house.

April 3, 1859, Rev. Courtlen Skinner, an uncle of Sister McKee, commenced preaching for them, and on that date the first communion service was held. He labored with the church only a short period, living alternately with C. L. Patton and Hugh McKee, a week each.

On April 30, 1860, Brother McKee related his christian experience and was accepted for baptism. He was followed by Ephriam Hanna, May 14th, and both were baptised the same day. Sister Jemima McKee soon joined her husband in church fellowship, for in two weeks, less one day, she was also received for baptism, and on the following Sabbath she with Brother Thomas Edwards received christian baptism.

June 26, 1860, Brother Decatur Veatch, of Randolph's Grove church, not having a letter, was accepted on his experience. The next month one more addition, George B. Conn united by letter.

Elder Freeman supplied the church for about three months and was succeeded by Elder Benton, who preached only a few Sabbaths. At this time the church voted to co-operate with neighboring Baptist churches to join an association. Delegates met at Metamora, September 21, 1859, and "The Illinois River Baptist Association East" was organized. At a meeting held August 6, a committee was appointed to secure lots for the erection of a house of worship.

On April 7, 1860, a call was given to Rev. B. F. Scriven to become pastor. The call was accepted and Rev. Scriven became the first pastor the church had, though giving only a part of his time to the work in Fairbury. At the same meeting Wm. Edwards was received to membership on the relation of his Christian experience. The progress which up to that time was slow, became more marked and rapid. The first anniversary of the newly formed association met at Panola, at which they find reported from Fairbury: increase by baptism 6, by letter 6, by experience 2, total membership 19. The following year the increase was by baptism 15, by letter 4, total membership 38. Everything was now in a very unsettled state, owing to the war of the rebellion, and the little band report much suffering occasioned by it. Four of their number had gone to the front, names not given, and others express their willingness to go. Services were held in a hall during these years and up to 1865 or 66 it was situated somewhere near where Mr. Werling's butcher shop now stands. Notwithstanding these difficulties the church grew in numbers and power all through Rev. Scriven's pastorate of some three years. He had the privilege of baptising 27, of receiving by letter 17, by experience 3, total 47, so that in 1863 it was strong enough to entertain the association. Meetings were held in a school house at the "grove" with several conversions. Assisted in the building of what is known as "The Union Meeting House," and still appoints one of its trustees.

In 1864 Rev. W. C. F. Hempstead was called to the pastorate for one year. A church edifice was now commenced. Four lots were donated for this purpose by Brother Caleb L. Patton, 2 of them were afterwards sold to help pay for the erection of the building. A thousand dollars were loaned from the Baptist Church Edifice Fund. It was purposed to construct a frame building, and timber was given and laid upon the site, but it was learned that it would be less expensive to build with brick, so the lumber was sold and a brick structure erected. But, as it is too often the case, the concern and anxiety of building the material structure mitigated against the spiritual and only two baptisms were reported. The total membership is now 42. And for the first time a Sunday School is mentioned with 50 scholars.

The building of the house of worship was beset with many difficulties, money scarce, material and wages high. When the walls were put up they stood uncovered for some six months or more, while more than a year passed away before its completion. Pastorless, disheartened, the church sought divine help and guidance. At length an urgent request was sent to Rev. James Carnes to come and undertake the oversight. He visited the church and after carefully looking the field over decided to accept the task and entered upon his labors June 25, 1865. With his coming new vigor was put into every department of church work and soon prosperity began to smile upon their endeavors. The house of worship was completed in 1866 and dedicated to the service of God, while soon the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord, and echoed with the songs of converted souls. The records are lost which cover this

period so that the particulars regarding those services cannot be given. Brother Carnes was a man of great spiritual power and his ministry was blessed with what may be termed a continuous revival. The church reached its greatest strength during his pastorate, numbering 260 members or more, in 1868 as many as 56 were baptised into the fellowship of the church, and in 1869, 54 more. Total baptisms during a pastorate of a little less than five years was 189.

At a meeting held July, 1869, a resolution was unanimously adopted setting forth the church's attitude towards what was deemed "sinful amusements," condemning the practice of a few members of this church attending circuses and other places for sinful pleasure, with a request that they attend no more. During 1870 a mission was established at Forrest with a good degree of success; others had previously been at Potosi and Weston, dates not stated. In March of that year Weston became an auxiliary organization to Fairbury and in the following year an independent church, 41 members taking letters from the mother church.

Rev. J. Jones was the next pastor. Stayed one year. One addition by baptism. Rev. A. Gross then supplied the pulpit for four months. Rev. J. C. Reed was the next pastor. Called September 6, 1873, and on Nov. 13 was ordained, Rev. C. D. Merit preaching the ordination sermon.

Rev. I. S. Manan followed, giving two-thirds of his time. In the spring of 1875 five weeks of special meetings were held and are cherished as among the most precious seasons ever enjoyed by the church. The interest at the close was so great that it was voted to continue them, but sickness compelled the pastor to discontinue them. Twelve happy converts were a part of the result, while several were restored to their first love and zeal in the Savior's cause. Seventeen were baptised during the year.

He was succeeded by Rev. E. R. Pierce, who remained from April, 1875, to April, 1876.

After him came Rev. C. D. Merit, whose pastorate extended over a period of six years. This is the longest pastorate in the history of the church. No special meetings were held during these years, yet 16 followed their Lord in baptism, 32 were admitted by letter and six by experience.

Rev. A. Robbins was pastor January, 1884, to 1885. No particulars recorded.

The church was then supplied with students from Morgan Park Theological Seminary. Brother Gill would have become pastor but failing health prevented. Rev. S. A. Perrine was with them a few months and five were baptised.

Rev. J. J. Crosby, then a student, was asked to supply the pulpit indefinitely. After supplying from Nov. 1885, to March, 1886, was called to the pastorate for one year. A council was convened and he was ordained to the gospel ministry June 29, 1886, Rev. J. W. Tanner, of Pontiac, preaching the ordination sermon. During his pastorate a series of meetings were held at the school house near Brother T. C. Spencer's home with encouraging results, 11 joining the church by baptism, making 15 during the year. By that time the old meeting house was rendered unsafe by the decaying of its foundations, and the

question of a new building or an entire reconstruction of the old was forced upon the church. It was after mature deliberation decided to pull down the old and rebuild on the same site. It seemed a great undertaking when the financial strength was gauged, and to Brother Crosby is in no small measure due the credit for so bold an enterprise. A committee consisting of Brothers C. D. Merit, H. McKee, Thomas Weeks, J. W. Beers, and T. O. Cook, was appointed June 2, 1888, to carry out the decision arrived at. The present neat and comfortable house, costing $5,479.19, is the result. It was completed and opened for divine worship March 17, 1889. There was lacking $147.45 to meet the indebtedness at the opening service, when subscriptions were taken to the amount of $300.13, and the house was dedicated free from all incumberance with money in the treasury. Dr. A. A. Kendrick, of Shurtliffe college, preached the dedicatory sermon from 1 Cor. 3:23, "And ye are Christ's." The services were very impressive and deeply interesting.

It is only becoming that mention should be made and due credit accorded to the noble, self-denying work of the Ladies Home Mission circle. There is no church work done but what the ladies, if not first in it, give it their warmest sympathy and sanctified zeal; these by their earnest, consecrated toil, earned the handsome sum of $610 and gave it towards the furnishing of the church.

Rev. J. W. Neyman, another student of Morgan Park, supplied from April to September of 1889. He baptised 4.

The present pastorate commenced on the last Sabbath of February, 1890. During the few months it has been our privilege to labor among you, although sickness has greatly interfered with our work, we have not been without tokens of the Master's smile. A successful young people's society has been organized, 4 have been buried with Christ in baptism, 1 received by experience and 3 by letter.

The deacons, all of whom have served the church with much fidelity and to whom in large measure may be attributed the success of the Lord's work, some of them have gone to their reward, others occupy places in Christ's Kingdom elsewhere, and a few remain with us still. Their names, as far as I can find them, are Caleb L. Patton, Wm. Carpenter, Tilton Howard, Harley Ingersol, Adolphus Stuckey, D. B. Shepherd, Hugh McKee, T. C. Spencer and Thomas Weeks.

It would be well to remember also the work of the church clerks. The office of clerk requires much care and painstaking, and the incumbent does his work gratuitously, a service of love to the church, and without hope of public honor. Their names, as far as I can find them, are Richard Hanna, R. L. Patton, Tilton Howard, D. B. Shepherd, C. C. McConnell, T. O. Cook, Mrs. L. J. Sterling, and T. C. Spencer, the present clerk.

The church has granted license to preach the gospel to Brothers James F. Wells, now pastor at Hiawatha, Kan., P. H. Faulk, until recently pastor at Benson, Ill., but now pursuing a course of study at Morgan Park Seminary, Wm. Carpenter, and R. L. W. Jamison. It has ordained to the ministry Brothers N. L. Rigby, J. R. Reed and J. J. Crosby.

A Sunday school has been connected with the church during most of its history. It has been a constant feeder of the church, a large number who have united with the church, there received preparation for the work of grace under the tuition of some Sunday school teacher. Our beloved brother, J. W. Beers, has been its superintendent for 23 consecutive years and will tell us more about it later on in these services.

The written history of the church must come to a close. There is an unwritten history resplendent with sacrifice and toil and courage for God, with prayer and hope. It is God's history, and in it all the service of the people, one and all, which it is impossible to describe or even mention in a history like this, is inscribed; and they who have labored for Christ with this church, shall some day have mention made of them and receive their reward.

We are now 32 years old, we ought to be in our full strength of vigorous christian manhood, and ready to make for God and His Christ a grander history in the years to come. The past is behind us, the present is ours, the future may be given to us. Let us so improve the present that the future may have a brighter record than the past.

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